DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 307 174 SO 019 642

AUTHOR Hepburn, Mary A.
TITLE I Get Deja Vu When I Read You, Mr. Hirsch.
PUB DATE 23 Jul 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium (Binghamton, NY, July 21-23, 1988).
AVAILABLE FROM Mary A. Hepburn, Carl Vinson Institute of Government, Terrell Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Back to Basics; *Basic Skills; Core Curriculum; *Curriculum Design; Curriculum Evaluation; *Educational Objectives; Elementary Secondary Education; Learning Processes; Mass Media Effects; *Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Cultural Literacy; Dewey (John); *Hirsch (E D); Washburne (Carleton Wolsey)

ABSTRACT

In each era of curriculum reform the prevailing perceptions of what the school curriculum must accomplish define the standard of cultural literacy for our society. E. D. Hirsch believes that contemporary youth lack cultural literacy and that without this knowledge of the fundamental facts of U.S. culture they cannot effectively read or communicate, be informed citizens, or do their jobs well. Hirsch calls for a curriculum based on a list of approximately 5,000 bits of information commonly understood by all literate citizens. However, his list of facts for the 1980s is based only on the judgement of a few professors and is biased towards western academic culture. Carleton Washburne had already developed a similar idea in the 1920s. By arduously examining the literature of 1905-1922, a group of educators developed a list of over 61,000 facts upon which a balanced education that included reflective thinking and application could be based. While Hirsch's list is static and unlikely to provide education for the future, Washburne's proposal reveals a greater sensitivity to a changing or dynamic cultural composition by including methods for updating data. (PPB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
MARY A. HEPBURN
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED307174

SO019642

I GET DEJA VU WHEN I READ YOU, MR. HIRSCH*

Mary A. Hepburn
University of Georgia

Last year E.D. Hirsch published Cultural Literacy: What Each American Needs to Know, a prescription for the school curriculum that quickly made the best seller list. In the book and numerous articles and interviews (e.g., see Hirsch 1983, 1985, 1987), the author decries great deficiencies in student knowledge of the factual information that he considers necessary to the continuance of our "national community." He finds that American youth today lack "cultural literacy," and without this knowledge of fundamental facts of American culture they cannot effectively read or communicate, be informed citizens, or do their jobs well.

According to Hirsch, the problem stems from characteristics of the school curriculum. The schools, he says, have failed to provide for the continuous transmission of significant background information specific to our culture, the information that would make American youth literate. Instead, young people are now gaining most of their cultural information from television and therefore know more about rock stars than about the Spanish Armada or Shakespeare. Although Hirsch is an English professor with an interest in teaching grammar and literature, he applies his criticisms as well to the social studies curriculum.

Why have the schools failed? He attributes the miscarriage of education to "faulty" educational theories that have dominated curriculum and instruction in the U.S. and points his accusing finger at John Dewey and his

* Prepared for presentation at the 1988 meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium, July 21-23, Binghamton, New York.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

followers, who Hirsch says have focused education on the learning of "hollow" thinking skills to the detriment of learning specific content. This emphasis on skills and processes, he says, has interfered with the transmission of "shared historical information" about western culture and led us down the road of cultural illiteracy.

In regard to the social studies curriculum, he views the second decade of this century (the era of the 1916 NEA curriculum recommendations and the Seven Cardinal Principles) as the beginning of the demise of our cultural purpose. Subjects that were intended to inculcate "traditions and duties," i.e., history and civics, declined into "social studies," a subject aimed at developing skills for living based on the needs of the child and the needs of society. From that period forth, Hirsch paints a picture of a curriculum hampered by skill-building, "learning-by-doing," and "fragmentation" -- all quite devoid of content. Thus in the 1980s we have a generation of young people who do not understand the shared information of the history, literature, and mythology of our culture -- the knowledge that separates literate people from the rest.

Of course, Hirsch's criticisms about student deficiencies in factual knowledge are not inaccurate. There <u>is</u> evidence that in twelve years of schooling disconcertingly high percentages of students are failing to learn the fundamentals of history and geography. But what is to be done?

Hirsch's solution is one approach to "back to basics." He calls for a curriculum based on a list of information -- the names, places, phrases, and dates commonly understood by "all literate Americans." Specifically, his solution is presented in the form of approximately 5,000 facts that any literate American should know. Learning this body of factual information,

according to Hirsch, will provide "the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children" to rise out of poverty and illiteracy.

The inspired list was drawn up by Hirsch with the assistance of two colleagues at the University of Virginia -- a physics professor and a history professor. Beyond the list, Hirsch offers no real program of curriculum reform. This, I suppose, is left to educators who are sympathizers. (Thus far, I have seen the list used [1] by critics to point up its WASPish narrowness in excluding such greats as Jose Marti and Harriet Tubman, and [2] as a kind of snobbish trivia test: "How many of these do you know? How well educated are you?")

Hirsch's proposal for refocusing the curriculum has received much media attention and some great praise from back-to-basics proponents, such as Secretary of Education William Bennett, as an educational innovation for our times. Of course, the idea of a fact-based curriculum is not new; **but** neither is the idea of basing curriculum on a determination of the most **culturally significant** names, events, and places. Let me take you back to the 1920s to an earlier, perhaps better thought out, curriculum proposal based on a similar notion of cultural literacy.

A Sixty-Year-Old Idea

When I first read about Hirsch's book, I certainly had a feeling of **deja vu.** In the process of researching and teaching about the history of the social studies, I have become particularly interested in the writings of Carleton Washburne, Superintendent of Schools of Winnetka, Illinois in the 1920s. Washburne was an exceptional administrator armed with a doctorate from the University of California, an interest in educational research, and a

commitment to "the new education." In the social studies he sought to combine the strengths of progressive educational reforms with what he considered to be fundamental knowledge or **cultural literacy.**

Washburne perceived that progressive educators, reacting against rigid fact- memorization, had turned their backs on the need for a common body of knowledge to facilitate the exchange of ideas. He argued that this factual knowledge was a necessary accompaniment to thinking skills if students were to effectively solve personal and public problems and society was to advance.

He proposed that "scientific" or objective means be used to determine just what content was fundamental to our culture. He would not set himself or his colleagues as a measure of the formula for cultural literacy, nor would he rely on historians ("interested in history for its own sake"). Instead, he turned to the literature of the times to enable students "to understand what other people are talking and writing about". The content of the social studies curriculum would be based on the results of tabulations of the most frequently mentioned persons, places, and events in newspapers, news magazines, popular and literary periodicals, and major literary works. Committees of teachers and supervisors in his school district arduously examined the literature in 1905 - 1922 publications and tabulated 81,434 allusions. Requiring that the final list include only facts alluded to for at least six periodical years, the list was reduced to 61,616 facts -- more than 13 times the size of Hirsch's list.

Comparison: Similar But Different

Was my feeling of **deja vu** warranted? Is the Hirsch proposition the same as Washburne's 1920s facts-oriented program? Washburne, like Hirsch,

articulated in his time an understandable concern that basic information of the culture was being neglected. Also like Hirsch, he indicated that the list of facts would have to be revised periodically to reflect changes in cultural knowledge.

Unlike Hirsch, Washburne worked out a **systematic basis** for determining which facts should be selected as quideposts to cultural literacy. The way his teachers drew up the list estimated the probability that students would need that knowledge. Also, unlike Hirsch, Washburne prepared a rationale for and developed a means of **organizing** the factual information into social studies curriculum materials. As he stated, "We cannot merely throw names and incidents together and call the results curriculum" (Washburne, 1923). Rather, he worked with teacher groups to develop student materials "that would be both interesting and accurate" (Washburne and Stearns, 1928). To give unity and coherence to the information list, he had his committees of educators develop units of study based on such organizing themes as life in ancient times, the interdependence of man, and questions of cause and effect.

Perhaps most important to Washburne, the learning of the list of essential factual information was not to be an end in itself but a part of a well-balanced education diet that included reflective thinking and application. A well-organized presentation of the factual information would build the groundwork for "more advanced social science courses in which problem solving and the recognition of human integrality would be guiding principles" (Washburne, 1928). Hirsch, on the other hand perceives "the piling up of information" as the direct means to improve education (Hirsch, 1987).

Hirsch, I think, is inclined to throw out the baby with the bath water in

his arguments with Dewey and progressive education. Hirsch complains that Dewey opposed the "mere accumulation of facts" and "placed too much faith in children's ability to learn general skills" from "a few experiences" (Hirsch, 1987). Washburne, on the other hand, attempts to reconcile Deweyan ideas with more traditional concerns by taking into account **context** along with **content** in educational planning. Moreover, he reveals a better understanding of Dewey and the criteria of continuity and interaction for educative experiences. In developing social studies curriculum, Washburne made organization and internal continuity of learning prime considerations along with interaction with external factors such as environment, community, and society.

Conclusion

The call for "cultural literacy" seems to be a recurring prod to reform in social studies education. Like apple pie, it is always tasteful and acceptable. But it is an amorphous concept. Various proposals for changing the social studies curriculum in this century have been based on various conceptualizations of cultural literacy. During certain periods of the history of the social studies, cultural literacy has been defined with an emphasis on facts, information, western heritage and subject matter content. In other periods, however, cultural literacy has been viewed with a concern for social assimilation, citizen participation, assistance of the disadvantaged, equalizing of opportunities, and solving social problems. Hirsch himself (1983) is aware of the vulnerability of the concept: "Literacy is not just a formal skill; it is also a political decision. The decision to want a literate society is a value-laden one . . . ."

In each era of curriculum reform prevailing perceptions of what the

school curriculum must accomplish define the standard of "cultural literacy" for our society. The ephemeral concept of what is fundamental and necessary in education shifts and changes as do conditions in the society. In one period there is a demand for greater knowledge of the past; in another, a demand for more practical skills. Consequently, it is not surprising that a "new idea" for improving curriculum in the eighties should make us feel that we have seen it before. It is similar, but quite different. The present and future are always constructed on the past. But newer is not always better.

Although I doubt that list making assures a sound and appropriate curriculum, clearly social studies in any period must have a knowledge base. But I think Hirsch has missed the boat by presenting alphabetical bits and pieces of information that confound organization or instruction. His facts list for the eighties is biased toward western academic culture, and, based on the judgment of a few professors, it is thus static and limited and unlikely to provide for education for the future. In contrast, Washburne's 1920s list and the methods for obtaining and updating it reveal greater sensitivity to technological change, changing cultural composition, the needs of knowledge for the workplace as well as the reading room, and a concern for cross-national communication in a shrinking world. If we must have facts lists or lists of knowledge objectives, it seems to me that sixty years ago Washburne had a better proposal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. "Cultural Literacy," The American Scholar 52 (Spring, 1983) 159-169.

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. "Cultural Literacy Doesn't Mean Core Curriculum," English Journal 74:6 (October, 1985) 47-49.

Hirsch, E.D., Jr. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1987.

Washburne, Carleton, "Building A Fact Course in History and Geography," in Twenty-Second Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Co., 1923.

Washburne, Carleton and Stearns, Myron. Better Schools: A Survey of Progressive Education in American Public Schools. New York: The John Day Co., 1928.

Washburne, Carleton. A Living Philosophy of Education. New York: The John Day Co., 1940.